Traditional Prostitution, a Stigma or Necessary Evil in Pakistan?

A Case Study of Shahi Mohallah in Lahore

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Abstract:

This article explores the historical evolution of prostitution in Pakistan, particularly focusing on the post-partition trends of traditional prostitution. Prostitution, one of the earliest professions, has long held a significant role in society, flourishing under social, religious, and political patronage. The study emphasizes the overlooked link between traditional prostitution and performing arts, noting that while prostitution is stigmatized today, it was once widely accepted in South Asia. The profession, especially the red-light areas, historically provided Pakistan with some of its finest artists and singers which contrasts with the current criminalization and state repression of traditional prostitution. Shahi Mohallah, Lahore's historical red-light district, serves as a central case study. The article highlights the marginalization of residents due to state crackdowns, which displaced sex workers to urban outskirts, leading to the rise of forced prostitution. The research seeks to demonstrate that forced prostitution was not a traditional part of Shahi Mohallah's sex work culture, which had long been intertwined with performing arts. Through historical analysis and exploratory research, the article aims to provide a broader understanding of the changing dynamics of traditional prostitution in post-colonial Pakistan, exploring how state policies have transformed the industry.

Key Words: Prostitution, Traditional Prostitution, Stigma, Shahi Mohallah in Lahore, History of Sex Work in Indian-Subcontinent

Introduction

Prostitution, often referred to as the 'world's oldest profession,' is a global phenomenon that has existed in virtually every society throughout history. It involves the exchange of sexual services for money or goods and can be found in various forms across different cultures and socio-economic settings. Prostitution has deep historical roots in human civilization with references found in the religious scripture, historical records and texts (Nevile 1996). In ancient civilizations like Mesopotamia and Greek Civilization, the institution of prostitution was not only regulated by the state but also integrated into social life. Sex workers enjoyed well reputed social image and considered inevitable part of the elite public entertainment with facing no general contempt from conservative segments of societies in these civilizations.

In ancient times, there was even a concept of religious prostitution, where the individuals engaged in sexual acts, as a part of religious rituals. However, it was rare and no authentic historical source verifies it explicitly. The institution of prostitution in the South Asian region of the world has been a unique phenomenon from the very beginning. Prostitution was not always interpreted solely as a sexual activity and other art forms (such as dancing, poetry and singing) deeply integrated with it making it a novel case study for researchers. Historians have played a very crucial role in marginalization or normalization of this phenomenon. Conservative historians have kept this historical profession out of the moral orbit of the society and considered it inappropriate enough to do thorough research on. Only if they did write, they not only delegitimized but rather criminalized it. However, in contemporary times, the worldwide talk on prostitution is exceedingly polarized, with debates centered on issues like human rights and an open approach to gender equality which advocates for decriminalization of sex work, contend that recognizing it as authentic labor can upgrade the security and rights of sex laborers, lessening shame and misuse.

On the other hand, adversaries regularly see prostitution as inalienably exploitative and advocate for other arrangements aimed at rehabilitating the sex workers into other professions as an incentive for dropping their former so called 'diabolical' profession. But prostitution remains a complex and multifaceted issue with deep historical roots and significant contemporary implications. Addressing the challenges associated with prostitution requires a subtle understanding of its legal, economic, social, and health dimensions, along with a commitment to protecting the rights and well-being of those involved in the sex trade.

Research Methodology

The study is descriptive-analytical and is carried out by digging out the information on the topic from a variety of the books and journal articles as secondary sources. Thorough archival research has been conducted. The qualitative method applied to this research helps to develop an insightful understanding of the pre-existing ideas on this subject. By combining descriptive and analytical elements, the study not only describes the current state of knowledge but also critically examines and interprets the findings to draw meaningful conclusion.

Prostitution Trends in Pakistan

Culturally and historically, Pakistan is very much a part of South Asia. Once geographically a part of British India, after independence in 1947, retained essential features of social and cultural life of India (Gangoli, 2006). Traditional prostitution was quite acceptable and even patronized by successive sovereigns of the Indian soil. Since right after its independence, the process of Islamization of the newly established state started as the demand for a separate was laid on the basis of the religious differences. The anticipated secular spirit of newly established state got sacrificed in the name of justifying projected prime cause for independence.

Prostitution in Pakistan has also bore the brunt of initial phases of Islamization. Prostitution has no legal status in Pakistan. No proper legislation mentioning sex trade in

Pakistan has been done so far. Since sex industry here has no legal status that is why it has been criminalized. However, it is important to understand some of the laws made in Pakistan during the first decade of its inception, dealing indirectly with sex trade in Pakistan. The Pakistan Penal Code was inherited from the British Penal Code of India which was introduced back in the 1860 by Lord Macaulay. It is the mixture of both Islamic and the British laws. Two of its articles (372 and 373) indirectly declare pimping and selling minors for the purpose of sex illegal. And till the 1979, the consensual sexual activity between the two adults was legal in Pakistan (Gangoli, 2006). So, the people associated with sex trade in Pakistan to some extent enjoyed the freedom of carrying out these activities.

Then, Zina ordinance under the canopy of Hadood Ordinance got introduced in 1979. It changed the face of society not only for the female sex workers but also women of all segments became victim of harsh and retrogressive version of Zia's Islamization. The boundary between the adultery and rape was blurred under Zina law. Police started arresting sex workers, particularly of red lights areas, by charging them under adultery crime. The same way many rape cases were presented as adultery cases in the court. Pregnancy of victim was taken as solid legal evidence to justify adultery while most of the pregnancies happened out of forced sex (Gangoli, 2006). Under such peculiarly suffocating circumstances, the sex industry in Pakistan is poorly documented and analyzed, owing to its taboo status given by the state which is further bolstered by fundamentalists. Now in contemporary times, many ordinances of Zia's era have been revoked by the state but still the sex industry is retaining its illegal status.

However, despite its illegal status, the sex market in Pakistan has been increasing. The prostitution profession is in its peak in the sub-continent. India and Pakistan are the most vulnerable states (Hayat, 2013). There are only a handful of identifiable traditional red light areas remaining in the Pakistani cities: most prostitutes began a process of moving out from traditional sites in the 1960s. Today sex workers are dispersed throughout the urban areas in

residential suburbs. They operate now in guest houses and hotels and it is very hard to identify either sex workers or sex work sites. Anecdotal evidence suggests that buying sex is common (Brown, 2001). It is more usual in the urban areas but rural men also buy sex at travelling fairs and when they visit the cities during holidays.

Holy Shrines, bus stands, and railway stations are the most popular spots for these poor rural men to find a pimp for booking a sex worker with less payment of a few hundred (Brown, 2001). More affluent men may have a series of 'second' or 'third' wives: these may be sex workers with whom they would have a semi-permanent sexual relationship in return for financial support. These men and women do not see their relationship in terms of client and sex worker, it is perceived as half marriage by them (Brown, 2001).

Most of the women who are involved in this profession are isolated socially. Especially who live in red light areas practice *purdah* because they do not want to expose their professional identity to every second person in the neighborhood, owing to the stigma attached to their profession (Brown, 2001). In the present times, due to increasing involvement of technology in daily life, many new forms of prostitution have emerged in Pakistani society as well. Although during the early decades, with less interference of technology, specific areas were notorious for such activities, but now since life has been digitized, so criminal status of sex trade in Pakistan is forcing the people of this profession to look for alternatives for their survival in the business. The 'streetwalkers', 'escort girls', or 'call girls', all these new forms are further weakening the broken traditional culture of sexual entertainment. These new forms of sex work are also more dangerous especially for young girls joining it out of economic compulsion. They inherently do not belong to this profession. Such girls are at a high risk of being trafficked into forced prostitution. Most of the young women from poor families are sold into this by their husbands.

Male and gay prostitution is also increasing in Pakistan; however gay prostitution is not a recent phenomenon in the country. Today many areas of large cities in the country have become virtual red-light districts for gay sex (Murray, Roscoe and Allyn, 1997). Gigolo culture is also present where elite aging women hire young boys for sex and pay them for it. But this is so far rare in South Asia and a more popular practice in the west. Because it is a patriarchal society, where even educated women hardly get to think about their sexual urges and consider it even immoral to have them. Patriarchy promotes sexual repression of women in Pakistan. That is why male sex workers majorly have male clientele. Women involved in the practice of prostitution in Pakistan can be divided into three broad categories: women who have been trafficked or lured into the profession, women who have been born into the profession and women who willingly reach a pimp to make extra money (Gangoli, 2006). Pakistan has become a unique case to study since all the present forms of prostitution exist in the same region where the profession enjoys no legal status. Mostly professionals of this community are harassed by local police, mafia groups and face isolation from the society.

Exurbs of metropolitan cities are dominated by escorts, call girls and new brothers established in rented houses in suburbs while city centers are mostly having one historical red light area established centuries ago, grown old, defunct, and neglected by the state now. These red-light areas of Pakistan are the remnants of the glorious past of traditional prostitution or courtesan culture that existed in Indian sub-continent. Since these areas are mostly targeted by the state that is why mushrooming of more dangerous form of prostitution is increasing at exponential rate in all the big cities of Pakistan. It is very important to dive into the history of origin of courtesan culture in India in order to be able to differentiate traditional form from the present day form of prostitution in Pakistan.

Back to the beginning of the Profession in the Indian Subcontinent: (Traditional Prostitution)

The culture of prostitution existed in the India long before the time when people started to record history. One finds the origins of dance and singing in the Hindu religious texts Ramayana and Mahabharata. Hinduism itself as a religion has a space for dancing and singing in its religious rituals. Islam came late to the Indian soil, so long before it, the local religious traditions influenced by Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism were established. Although, prostitutes have existed in other parts of the world around the same time but the concept of this institution embedded in religion was exclusive in India. In order to understand the evolution of this profession in India, understanding of the millennia long evolution of sex worker, is inevitably important.

Millennia-Long Evolution of Ancient Indian Sex Worker

In the religious text of the Hinduism, the term *apsara* has been many times mentioned with reverence and admiration. *Apsaras* were defined as divine dancers in Hindus epic literatures that they were sent from heaven to entertain the Hindu gods in temples. Many important names of *apsaras* like Urvashi, Menaka, and Ambika are mentioned in the Hindus religious scripts. Scripts also described their physical attributes and beauty standards of India were influenced by their described physical appearance (Nevile, 1996). Urvashi *apsara* is considered as the first to introduce the concept of divine dance and singing for temple services. All these figures were part of the Hindu mythology and hardly had any contact with reality. Rabindranath Tagore appreciated the beauty of Urvashi in his poetry (Nevile, 1996). He has dedicated this beautiful short poem to her which is given below:

In the assembly of gods when you dance in ecstasy,

O swaying wave, Urvashi!

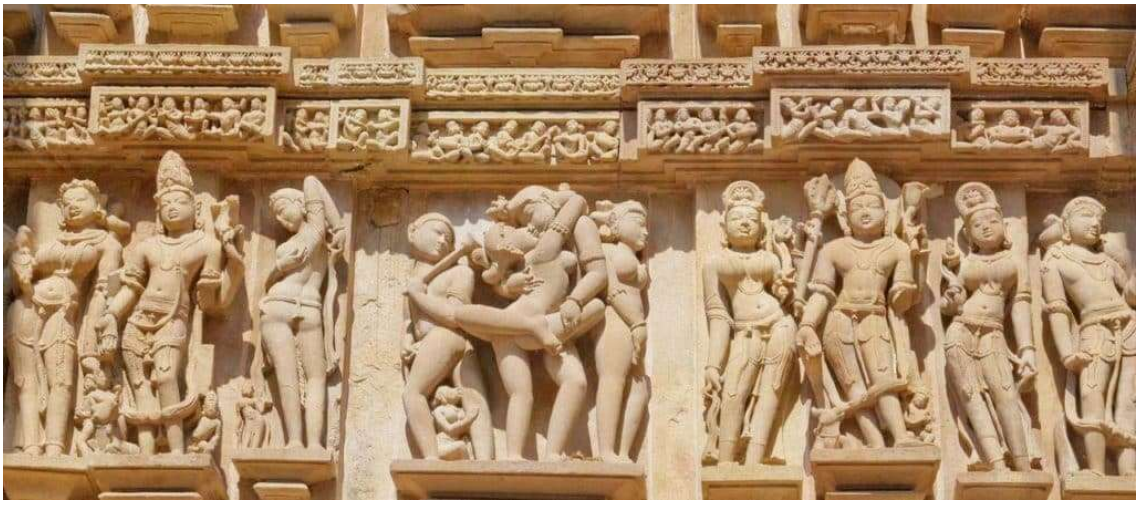
The sea surges in the same rhythmic dance;

In the crest of the corn the skirt of the earth shivers;

From the jewelry on your breast stars drop into the sky (Nevile, 1996).

Practically, for the first time, when women got involved into this business, it was through *devdasi* system. These were young virgin girls given by families to temple service as some religious sacrifice. Their purpose was to serve the temple gods and priests. They were beautiful and well trained dancers and singers. In most of the circumstances, they were married to the temple. So far, they did not perform any sexual service in the name of religion. They served gods and goddesses through entertainment at different festivals.

Hindu Temple Architecture: a Depiction of *Devdasi* System (Arise, 2024)



Devdasis were revered by people and held in high regard. Temples were patronized by local kings that is why these girls enjoyed very comfortable lives. Somnath and Jagonnath temples alone accommodated around a thousand *devdasis.* The secular counter-part of these were the *nartikas.* They had no direct association with temple or any religious institute. They were also popularly known as *rajdasi* (raj servant). They not only involved in entertainment of nobles of the day but also in establishing sexual relations with them for money and other goods. There were then *ganikas*, these women were like present day escort girls. They used to be quite famous in the town. Any man escorted by them was considered as a person of great wealth. Although they were not revered as much as *devdasis,* but they enjoyed pretty good reputation and privileges in the society (Nevile, 1996)

The Muslim invasion of India marked the beginning of a new phase of prostitution culture in India. Although dance and music are forbidden in Islam, but Muslim rulers continued to patronize these dancers. Amir Khusrau's writings are important in this regard since he was not hesitant to appreciate the beauty and talent of these Indian dancers. But one drastic change took place, that is, temples seized to be the center of dance activities. Now, these dancers and

singers found their new residence in royal palaces. Many *devdasis* also started practicing the court dance for incentives and privileges.

During Mughal times, Akbar was the great patron of arts. He regarded Indian art and culture in high place. He bestowed the title of *kanchini* upon them which means the gilded one (Nevile, 1996). He also brought Persian dancers to India. With decline of power in Delhi, the whole focus shifted to Lucknow nawabs, particularly the last nawab of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah generously patronized the courtesans and they started to be called *tawaif*. Ranjit Singh continued the practice of patronizing courtesans in Shahi Mohallah once established by the Mughals. Many nawabs, rajas, and late Mughals also married courtesans which further ascended them to the ladder of social prestige (Nevile, 1996).

Hindus played very important role in accommodating the dancers into the religious orbit of India and Muslim ruler's patronage helped them raise their social and economic position in the society. However, with increasing solidification of the East India Company rule in India, local traditional trends of courtesan system also witnessed a drift into new direction. Englishmen started to regulate the sex work in India for the first time. In this way, the institutionalization of this profession began with the dawn of colonial rule in India.

Many courtesans could not find any patronage from landlords and nobleman of Punjab. So, they started to move to other parts of India in the search of employment. The wealth of Englishmen attracted these courtesans and many of them then settled in the regimental towns of East India Company. Crimean war changed the circumstances for the sex workers in India. Many soldiers who participated in war contracted venereal diseases (García and Meerkerk, 2017). This made authority back in Britain concerned about the health of their soldiers. British Parliament ultimately passed Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 (An attempt to regulate prostitution). This act was implemented in 1869 (Garcia and Meerkerk, 2017). According to

this act, Indian sex workers were subjected to mandatory registration and medical examination. The Contagious Diseases Act marked the designation of Indian sex workers as the colonial subjects of British rule (Chatterjee, 1992). However, this also marked the beginning of the criminalization of this profession.

Those sex workers who failed to register themselves with the British officials or did not appear for regular medical check-ups, were issued arrest warrants and subjected to legal penalties (Garcia and Meerkerk, 2017). In this way, their job got confined to only providing sex services to the English *sahibs.* They were hardly interested in the *mujra* performances and expected them to meet their carnal instincts. At the same time, the modern type of prostitution started to show its early signs. As long as the sex worker continued to provide services to the soldiers, she retained her job, but as she contracted any sexually transmitted disease and was declared unfit by medical board, they disposed her off her job.

This was not the feature of traditional system. In that system as soon as the courtesan got retired, she took up the managerial role in traditional brothels. It is basically the British legacy of treating the prostitutes as sex workers and never as *kalakaars* (artists). Unfortunately, after partition both of the new states of India and Pakistan retained British impression of the prostitution considering it as a criminal activity. Both of the states have taken actions to curb the growing prostitution activities in their respective countries. The case of Pakistan's dealing with sex industry is quite peculiar. This issue along with case study of an important red light area in Pakistan shall be covered in succeeding pages for comprehensive understanding of this sensitive issue.

Dilapidating Condition of Traditional Prostitution in Pakistan

The condition of red-light areas in Pakistan is complex and reflects a range of socio-economic, legal, and cultural issues. These areas, often located in major cities, are characterized by

significant challenges, including exploitation, health risks, and social stigma. Mostly red light areas are a hub of practicing traditional forms of prostitution, but with the passage of time, traditional performances of singing and dancing are losing their significance and are replaced by the brothels in the city suburbs. In Pakistan, state easily confuses human trafficking with the sex industry. While human trafficking is more associated with modern form in which there is no space for artistic skills which are mandatory for traditional dancer to acquire (Habib, 2016). But state continue to target red light areas, particularly of Lahore, which was once a supplier of country's best artists, musicians and singers while letting the other more heinous forms of prostitution to operate unchecked.

Case Study of Famous Red Light Area of Lahore:

(Shahi Mohallah)

Tibbi mein chal ke Jalwa-i-Parwar Digar dekh

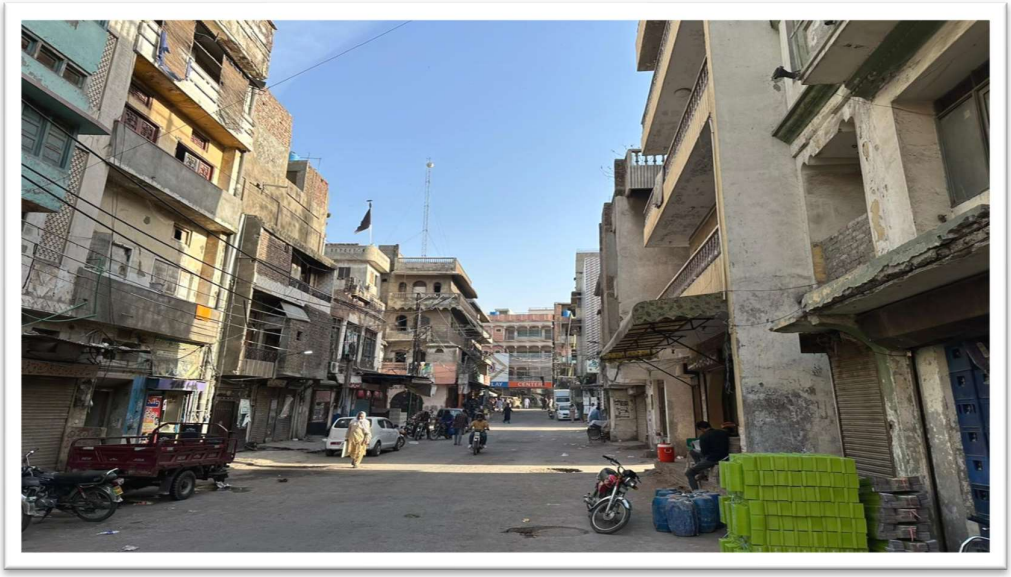
Are ye dekhne kí cheez hai ise bar bar dekh

(Come to Tibbi to watch the splendours of the Almighty.

It's the worthiest of sights, view it over and over again) (Sidhwa, 2005).

The red light area of Lahore known by many names as Shahi Mohallah, Hira Mandi, Tibbi Mohallah, has a long history of its existence. It is located in the walled city of Lahore. Once center of courtesans activities, now to almost defunct red light bazaar, is a place of great historical and cultural significance (Sidhwa, 2005). Present day infrastructure of the area is in no way match to its splendor in the past.

Condition of Shahi Mohallah 2024 (Captured by Author).



Few buildings are maintained. They are a testimony to the past glory but they do not retain their status as *kothas* but rather as fancy restaurants (Jalil, 2024). There are some actual *kothas* as well but they are inhabited by poor sex workers who could not get clients from posh areas. The rest of the buildings have turned into small shoe factories, and shops. There are houses in poor condition which can be rented on easy amount since not many renters come to area owing to its notoriety as a red light district. Only labor class rent rooms in the area because they cannot afford living in the other neighborhoods of Lahore. The original district was a collage of 14 bazaars, with Shahi Mohallah and Heera Mandi being the specific names of only two of them, but these names became so popular that the whole area was referred to in this way. Poetically, it is also called the *Bazaar e Husn*, the market of beauty. The other twelve bazaars of the area, are Kucha Shabaz Khan, Main Bazaar, Hyderi Street, Fort Road, Newan Chetram Road, Ucha Chetram Road, Koocha Sabz Peer, Bazaar Sheikhupurian, Bazaar Thana Tibbi, Gadi Mohalla and Tibbi Gali. Musical performances combined with prostitution are practiced in only six of these bazaars at present (Saeed, 2001).

The rest are like any normal bazaar of Lahore. But still people avoid visiting other bazaars of this area after evening. Because they fear that they might be suspected of looking for sex worker or pimping there (Saeed, 2001). Females cannot visit without any male escort because it can be risky for them. Customers might mistake them as prostitutes. Mostly two important communities reside in this area, *kanjars* (dancers) and *mirasis* (musicians). Both are dependent upon each other for their professional survival. *Kanjars* send their minor daughters to the *baithaks* of *mirasis* for their professional training in dance and singing (Gangoli). *Mirasi* community does not let its females to pursue their career in prostitution or even arts. Intermarriage is not traditionally allowed between the two communities. If this happens then it is the situation of embarrassment for both families involved.

In Shahi Molalla, there are categories of sex workers. On top of the pyramid are the ones who are inherent dancers, followed by those who entered business but not born into it but they live in the area. Third category is in the worst condition (Rahat, 2022). These are the part time sex workers, who do not live in area, just come for few hours, rent a room, entertain clients and then leave. These are looked down upon by the other two groups. They are derogatorily called *ghastis*. Tibbi gali is popular spot to find them. That is why tibbi gali is usually raided by police. Besides them, transgender sex workers also reside in the area (Qureshi, 2024).

Brief History of the Shahi Mohallah

History of the Shahi Mohallah dates back to the Mughal times, as discussion on the existence of institution of prostitution prevailed long before the advent of Muslim rule. When Akbar came into power, during sixteenth century, he shifted his capital to Lahore. Area for courtesans was established in the vicinity of the royal fort which was named as Shahi Mohallah (Butt, Latif and Qazi, 2021). Since the courtesans residing in the Mohallah were the source of entertainment for both the royal family and guest (Butt, Latif and Qazi, 2021). Mughal

princesses were sent to their *Kothas* for training in manners and fine etiquettes. The area back then enjoyed full state patronage and good reputation.

During the Ranjit Singh era, Prime Minister Hira Singh Dogra decided to open grain market in the same neighbourhood considering it lucrative spot, located in the city center, for commercial venture. As a result of this development, the business of *kothas* thrived because new financially strong commercial class also came to area and became regular rich clients of courtesans. Drastic change in perception of courtesans came with coming of colonial rule in India. Colonial masters in their dealing of courtesans were different from their former patrons of the area.

British people came with their own Victorian moral standards. And they gradually imposed those conservative principles upon locals as well. Social image of dancers also started to get affected adversely. By the late 1940s, British people were seeing them as solely sex workers disregarding all the other artistic talents they acquired over the centuries (Levine, 2004). Post-partition circumstances proved to be more fatal for the area. Those *kothas* which used to be run by retired *naika,* provided support system to the young dancers were no longer existent and have been replaced by *kothi khana* (new brothels in suburbs), these are mostly run by *dalal a*nd young girls are trafficked into forced prostitution against their will. They are completely disconnected from their families, unlike traditional prostitution, where family plays the major role in professional upbringing of a young girl into this business.

Diametrically Opposite Portrayal of Mohallah in Films and Paintings

The portrayal of Shahi Mohallah in films is based upon the idea of glamourizing and romanticizing the lives of Lahore *tawaifs*. Many commercially hit movies have been produced with sole purpose of poetically romanticize the portrayal of *tawaif*'s love life or tragic lovesick longing for a protagonist Nawab to come and rescue her from this sinful life. This kind of

courtesans' life representation takes viewers away from the ground realities of the place which sex workers of today are facing in Lahore. Hardly, any film or documentary has ever diverted its audience's attention towards the strong affiliation of courtesans with the shrine culture of Lahore rather climax is mostly focused around the *Nath uterwai* ceremony, further sensationalizing their lives. The political contributions of courtesans are normally left as flipped pages in the books of women history of South Asia.

Then *tawaif* term is mostly associated with Muslim women. Many influential Hindu and Sikh courtesans are conveniently omitted in the commercial film productions (Kapuria, 2024). While the portrayal of the today's dancers, better called *kanjaris* in the paintings by the local artists gives the complete opposite image of their life. Iqbal Hussein, a fine yet labelled as a controversial artist from red light district of Lahore, produced a number of paintings with sex workers of Shahi Mohallah as his main subject of interest.

Sex Workers of Shahi Mohallah: Paintings by Iqbal Hussain (Hussain, 2024).

He depicts the poor condition of their livelihood in present times where one notices that there is no relic of those showy glittery expensive dresses, which is normally the main focus of attention in the period films. It is very pertinent for people associated with artistic professions to present ground realities of sex workers facing while residing in the area. Otherwise, people will continue to have preconceived romantic ideals about their lives and real issues about prostitution would remain unaddressed.

Key Issues faced by the Community (Shahi Mohallah)

The community is in dire need of social rescue because they face problems of peculiar nature on daily basis that people from other neighborhoods of Lahore rarely experience. Local residents of the area are constant target of harassment by police. Tibbi police station is notorious for such activities. Police officers compete with each other for getting posted there. Because there are high chances of extorting bribes from residents on basis of forged cases, owing to the fact that certain acts of Zina Ordinances are still in practice (Brown, 2007). Bribery and extortion culture are further fanned by it. This culture has been mentioned in detail in book *Taboo* by Fouzia Saeed.

Second most important but ignored issue that sex workers of the area are facing is health hazards. Many sex workers are suffering from STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) (Bokhari, Nizamani, Jackson, Rehan, Rahman, Muzaffar, and Thaver, 2007). Since they are not aware of STDs, they hardly have any idea about using contraceptives. None of the women NGOs (non-governmental organizations) are actively working in the area, promoting sex education or making efforts to protect them from diseases. Many sex workers are AIDs or HIV patients. But they prefer not to go to hospitals, owing to the stigma attached to their profession. Societal torrential criticism is directly channeled into the direction of sex workers; clients are conveniently ignored. Although, it is the clientele which sustains this business, despite all the

efforts by the government to curb it. But only sex workers community of the area is persistent target of contempt and disgrace, male clients are easily exempted from criticism.

In the traditional system, dancers normally performed *mujra* at *kothas*. It was safe and free from any harassment because they were escorted and performed under the supervision of female manager, normally their mother. But in this modern system, where Kotha system is almost defunct, the system is shifted to new variety show or stage drama culture. Theatrical performances or variety shows are notoriously looked down upon, owing to prevalent conservative values attached to them. Despite the fact, Hira Mandi has provided Pakistani cinema with number of fine artists but as they turn actresses and singers. They are forced to hide their actual identities linked with Mohallah. Many elite *tawaifs* have found new homes in posh suburbs, looking for new patrons (Javed, 2024). The link between the song, dance and sex is loosening in Mohallah. Sex has taken precedence over the other artistic talents (Brown, 2007).

Recently, social debates are conducted around good women and bad women phenomenon and moral perception about them. Social commentators pathetically weigh the social image and moral character of sex worker (bad woman) against the good woman (other women not belonging to this profession) (Iram, Ilyas, Bilal, Parveen, and Chan, 2019). They assert that sex workers ought to be rehabilitated by accommodating them into other professions, without realizing that rehabilitees do not have other skills. Only jobs left for them are being domestic servants or so. They get paid less and at the same, hardly they escape sexual harassment because men continue to associate them with their past profession (Shah, 2004). So, practically speaking, there is no exit from prostitution in conservative societies like Pakistan. This issue has given rise to three categories of groups, along the line of legalization or criminalization of prostitution in Pakistan in general. Conservative segments argue in favor of criminalization of this profession on moral grounds while those who advocate for the

legalization argue that legalization can improve sex workers health, reduce crime, can help in generating tax revenue and give legal protection to prostitutes (Zakir Ullah, 2025). Some feminist and human rights activists put emphasis on the need to redefine sex work as a matter of bodily autonomy and human rights, while others emphasize the coercive and exploitative aspects, especially given the economic vulnerabilities (Ahmed, 2017).

Conclusion

The evolution of prostitution from ancient religious practices to contemporary socio-economic challenges reveals a complex interplay of cultural, legal, and economic factors. Understanding this multifaceted issue requires a deep dive into historical contexts, legal frameworks, and contemporary realities, ensuring the protection and well-being of those involved in the sex work. The historically unbreakable bond which exists between performing arts and traditional prostitution appears to be omitted from a wide range of academic research on prostitution. Researchers have been keenly focused on tracing the causes of escalating sex market in Pakistan, ignoring the fact that this profession has always existed in this region without outrageous reaction from society, so unlike today's persuasive perception of conveniently labelling prostitution a taboo. Prostitution in Pakistan has been criminalized and its more distorted form has emerged which is taking its roots in big cities like a forest fire. Legalization of traditional prostitution in defined areas by state is necessary to curb the malice of covert prostitution mushrooming in all the neighborhoods of Pakistan's big cities. The preservation of historically significant red-light areas like Shahi Mohallah is necessary in order to promote the well-being of its residents who are living here for centuries and continuously fighting the stigma attached to their neighborhood and profession. It is hoped that the trend of doing research on this topic is considered crucial to develop a firm strategy and a more comprehensive perspective on the phenomenon of prostitution.

Glossary

Apsara	Divine Dancer
Dalal	Pimp
Devdasi	God's maid
Ganika	Singer
Kanjar	Traditional dancer cum sex worker
Kotha	Traditional Brothel
Kothi khana	Brothel ran by a male pimp
Naika	Female manager of *Kotha*
Nartaki	Female entertainer
Rajdasi	Kingdom's maid
Tawaif	Courtesan

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